

ROLL CALL Around the Hill

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Historian Will Tell Story of the House

By Jaime E. Cherundolo

Three years after legislation was passed calling for a "Writing of the History of the House of Representatives," ghosts and current Members of the House will finally have their stories told.

Historian Robert Remini was chosen by the Library of Congress for this large undertaking, and he anticipates unlocking more than 200 years of Congressional history beginning this fall.

Many attempts have been made to document the history of the House in recent decades. Remini said one of the most famous at-

tempts was made by George Barnes Galloway in 1976 with the book "The History of the House of Representatives." Yet Remini said much of the work done was written by political scientists who sought to "right the wrongs," and rarely were they able to grasp a "true historical narrative."

"This writing will be a comprehensive piece from the first Congress up to the present," he said. "It is quite a challenge, but I've been working on so many periods of the House that I think I have caught a feel for it."

Professor emeritus of history

and the humanities at the University of Illinois, Remini has written several books about American history, including biographies on Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay. Remini, although retired, is still active in the history department at the University of Illinois and will continue there part-time while working on the House history.

Remini said one of his objectives for the project is to highlight personalities who have played large parts in the development and history of the House, but he will not limit it to that.

"It's a history of an institution,"

he said. "I'm trying to show the evolution and how speakers and others have influenced that evolution is important."

Remini has already started setting up meetings with Members and others he feels will be essential to his task. He is expected to come to the Library of Congress in November as the official Distinguished Visiting Scholar of American History.

"I will be there pretty soon," he said. "I certainly will be there the week of November 11 when the freshmen Congressmen arrive for their sessions."

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File Photo

Robert Remini is setting up meetings with Members to write the history of the House of Representatives.

Historian Will Write 'as Quickly as I Can'

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"I'd like to attend those to see how the House operates at present."

Senate Historian Richard Baker, who said day-by-day interviews are essential to keeping historical consciousness in his institution, agrees that Remini should attend the freshman events.

"You have to go behind the scenes and see how people do and did their jobs," he said. "Remini is a distinguished historian and knows so much about the Congress that he

begins with a head start.

"But it is a complex institution, and you have to keep pounding away at it."

This written history that Remini will have to pound away at was sponsored in 1999 by Rep. John Larson (D-Conn.) and passed under H.R. 2303, the History of the House Awareness and Preservation Act.

Larson, a former history teacher, said it seemed obvious that the "rich history of the people's chamber" should be chronicled.

"I have come across so many Members, even in the short time that I have been here, who can add to the history of the House," he said.

Pam Russell, legislative counsel for the Library of Congress, said funding for the project was not part of H.R. 2303, and currently the Library of Congress is funding the project privately through previously made donations.

"The funding is secured for getting him here and getting him started," Russell said.

"The advance from a publisher will defray

some of the cost. There will be fundraising down the road for what remains."

Librarian of Congress James Billington said Remini was chosen because he is a renowned historian and author who writes for his audience.

"We wanted a history that was authoritative but available to the general reader, one that would increase overall interest in the Congress," Billington said.

"That is exactly what kind of history Remini writes."

Remini said he cannot say now when the book will be done, but he will press himself to finish quickly. Negotiations for a commercial press publisher, he said, are already under way.

"Any pressure I feel will come from myself," he said. "Originally we wanted it done in 2005, but here it is nearly 2003.

"I will work as quickly as I can — I'm a quick writer."